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The 6-Year-Old and His Stuffed Tiger:

Understanding Why Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* Continues to Thrive

Whitney Mitchell

Professor Tara Hargrove

Comm-406-A

Southern Adventist University
Abstract

Popular narratives spread like wildfire, capturing readers’ attention and quickly spreading throughout the world. Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* is one of these popular narratives. Using Foss’s (2009) generative criticism, this paper argues that *Calvin and Hobbes* has been established as a timeless, highly-esteemed comic strip because of five prominent themes found throughout the strip: Generalizability, Emphasis, Failure, Hobbes as an Adult Persona, and Calvin as a Child Persona. Six strips were chosen for analysis from Watterson’s (1988) *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury*. Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm explains the usefulness and practicality of these themes in establishing *Calvin and Hobbes* as a cherished, enduring comic.

Keywords: Rhetorical criticism, generative criticism, narrative, comic, comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, Bill Watterson
Meeting Calvin and Hobbes: The Introduction

“Drawing in a comic strip is infinitely more important than we may think, for our medium must compete with other entertainments, and if a cartoonist does nothing more than illustrate a joke, he or she is going to lose,” writes Charles M. Schulz, author of the forward to Bill Watterson’s *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury* (Watterson, 1988). This statement accurately captures the delight that is *Calvin and Hobbes*. Although numerous comic strips have existed throughout the print era, *Calvin and Hobbes* remains a particular delight among a diverse audience. Why has this comic appealed to such a wide audience? How has *Calvin and Hobbes* managed to remain a popular, sought-after comic strip today? In this paper, I argue that *Calvin and Hobbes* has been established as a timeless, highly-esteemed comic strip because of five prominent themes found throughout the strip: Generalizability, Emphasis, Failure, Hobbes as an Adult Persona, and Calvin as a Child Persona.

Knowing Calvin and Hobbes: The Context

*Calvin and Hobbes* is a daily comic strip written and illustrated by American cartoonist Bill Watterson. The strip was syndicated from November 18, 1985 to December 31, 1995, and popular collections can still be found in bookstores today. At the height of its popularity, *Calvin and Hobbes* could be found in 2,400 newspapers worldwide and was read by an audience of hundreds of millions of people (Campanelli, 2010).

The strip follows the adventures of Calvin, a 6-year-old spiky-haired boy, and his stuffed tiger, Hobbes. To Calvin, Hobbes is very much alive — he looks, talks, and moves freely. To the rest of the characters, however, Hobbes is merely an inanimate stuffed tiger, Calvin’s plaything. The two share adventures, fight monsters, and fall— or eagerly climb— into mischief throughout
the comic. The series is set in the contemporary United States, but no specific location is consistently identified.

Print is the only medium in which these characters appear. Today, the comics can generally be found on bookshelves as *Calvin and Hobbes* bound collections. In an interview with Watterson, he comments, “…each product I considered seemed to violate the spirit of the strip, contradict its message, and take me away from the work I loved” (Andrews McMeel Publishing, n.d.). Watterson never sold the merchandising rights for his strip or characters, meaning that the world has never seen a legal stuffed Hobbes, Calvin t-shirt, or *Calvin and Hobbes* Saturday morning cartoon.

Despite this, *Calvin and Hobbes* has remained a popular comic, even after the end of its syndication run. It is no longer available to North American newspapers, but *Calvin and Hobbes* still appears in more than 50 countries and multiple languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, and Arabic (Campanelli, 2010). Bootleg t-shirts and stickers abound. Multiple fan websites scatter the Internet. A YouTube search of “Calvin and Hobbes” reveals fan-produced films, rave reviews, and an all-around appreciation for the comic.

Obviously, Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* left a significant impact on a large audience. What is it that makes this small piece so captivating? How did a 6-year-old boy and his stuffed tiger turn into beloved comic strip icons? Using Sonja K. Foss’s (2009) generative criticism and Walter Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm, this paper will explore why and how Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* captivated the world.

**Coding Calvin and Hobbes: The Method**

Generative criticism allows an artifact to generate its own questions, rather than prescribing a predetermined formula for analyzing the artifact. Foss (2009) outlines a nine-step
process for engaging in generative criticism: “1) encountering a curious artifact; 2) coding the artifact in general; 3) searching for an explanation; 4) creating an explanatory schema; 5) formulating a research question; 6) coding the artifact in detail; 7) searching the literature; 8) framing the study; and 9) writing the essay” (p. 387). Generative criticism strays from the traditional, formal methods of criticism by allowing the artifact to present itself to the viewer more freely and without perspective constraints.

Rather than code the entire Calvin and Hobbes collection, however, the selection was narrowed to a single collection titled The Essential Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury (Watterson, 1988). A random number generator and systematic sampling produced six strips for analysis. The random number generated defined page number: if it was the first number generated, the first strip on the page was used; for the second number, the second strip; for the third number, the third strip. The fourth number corresponded to the first strip of a page, the fifth number to the second strip, and the sixth number to the third strip. If the random number generator produced a full-page comic, this was used, and the systematic procedure continued as normal. This method resulted in three black and white single-line strips and three full-page color strips. (See the Appendix for the strips and their identification numbers.)

**Befriending Calvin and Hobbes: The Analysis**

In analyzing this text — that is, looking for the frequency and intensity of common threads among the six selected strips — five recurring themes became very prominent. These themes are Generalizability, Emphasis, Failure, Hobbes as an Adult Persona, and Calvin as a Child Persona. Put together, these themes demonstrate why and how Calvin and Hobbes captivated — and still captivates — such a diverse audience.

*Generalizability*
Throughout Watterson’s comic, no specific dates, locations, or events are identified. Instead, he offers subjects that all readers can easily relate to. For example, strip #1 depicts Calvin by a television, while his dad is pictured in a sofa-chair reading the newspaper. The television does not show a popular program, such as *Sesame Street*, nor is a recognizable name given to the newspaper, such as *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. Appropriating these specifics would narrow the audience Watterson reached by requiring readers to be familiar with these aspects. Instead, Watterson leaves the television and newspaper as simply those objects — without illustrating a specific program or newspaper, readers feel more familiar with the characters and their situation. Considering that *Calvin and Hobbes* was syndicated during the period just before the Internet boom, Watterson’s audience would have been intimately familiar with these media. Naturally, the fathers of many families might often be found reading the newspaper like Calvin’s father, while the children of the household could often be found watching television like Calvin.

Similarly, strip #2 identifies an event that families around the world are familiar with: back to school. Watterson does not identify which school Calvin attends or where it is located. As with the television program and newspaper, identifying specifics would narrow the audience *Calvin and Hobbes* could reach. Instead, he focuses on the exaggerated dread and disbelief that many children feel when the time of “back to school” comes along. Calvin is pictured moaning after just returning home from school, seemingly feeling entirely exasperated by the idea of having to write “a whole paragraph!!” about what he did over the summer (Watterson, 1988, p. 148). This is a common assignment throughout all grade levels, a nonspecific event that is relatable to a large audience. Young children near Calvin’s age would intimately connect to his disbelief, older student readers might yearn for the years of having to write a mere single
paragraph, and parent readers would recognize Calvin’s behavior as something they have seen in their own children. Watterson’s focus on common events (i.e., generalizability), rather than specifics, allows *Calvin and Hobbes* to reach a vast, diverse audience.

*Emphasis*

Watterson was competing with other media of the times, such as television and radio. In order to make *Calvin and Hobbes* truly relatable, he had to emphasize certain aspects of the strip. This would allow readers to understand the voice fluctuations, tones, and overall message. For example, strip #3 pictures Calvin and Hobbes preparing for a family outing. In the first frame, Calvin’s dad shouts, “Honey, we have to leave soon. Is Calvin taking his bath?” (Watterson, 1988, p. 90) However, these words are not illustrated as bland text. Instead, they are bolded to emphasize their volume. In a family household, one parent calling loudly to another from different rooms is a common scene. By bolding the text, readers easily understand the voice tone. The last frame of the strip also exhibits an example of textual emphasis. Calvin’s family is eating in a restaurant when Calvin’s father remarks, “Refresh my memory. How did I get talked into this one?” (Watterson, 1988, p. 90) The word “how” is bolded, creating a sarcastic tone of disbelief that rings familiar with readers.

Strip #5 also displays textual emphasis. In this strip, Calvin is seen preparing a blanket-parachute to jump out of his second-story bedroom window. As he jumps, he shouts “Geronimo!!” before crashing into the rose bushes below with a significant “Crunch” (Watterson, 1988, p. 75). Rather than using the customary black-and-white text bubbles, however, these singular words are exaggerated. “Geronimo!!” and “Crunch” are illustrated entirely with capital block letters. “Geronimo!!” is colored red, suggesting an urgent, dangerous feat as Calvin jumps from his window. “Crunch” is colored green, complementing the non-illustrated greenery that
Calvin inevitably crashes into. The bottom ends of the letters in “Crunch” are shaded darker than the top, suggesting a dark, foreboding end as Calvin falls to the ground. By using an illustrative emphasis through text, Watterson allows the audience to more easily comprehend and relate to *Calvin and Hobbes*.

**Failure**

Watterson’s approach to storytelling strays from the classic problem-solution schema. Rather than effective problem solving, many of the strips end in failure. Strip #4 depicts Calvin and Hobbes canoeing on a lake. Calvin’s unending imagination allows him to picture ordinary objects as larger-than-life creations, while Hobbes pinpoints the mundane reality of Calvin’s creations. For example, Calvin sees the “dim outline of a whale” beneath the water, but Hobbes sees nothing more than a rock (Watterson, 1988, p. 121). In the last frame, Calvin finally gives up on imagining something wonderful and wishes there was a movie theater nearby instead. Herein lies failure. Calvin, initially excited about imagining the wonders beneath the surface of the lake, ends up frustrated and bored because of Hobbes’ lack of imagination. Strip #6 also demonstrates failure. Calvin and Hobbes are seen attempting to “fine dine” in a red wagon while rolling downhill, but ultimately crash into a stony gulch.

Generally, readers prefer to experience the classic happy ending. Instead of providing the anticipated conflict resolution, however, Watterson focuses on failure. Failure in *Calvin and Hobbes* adds humor. Initially, pleasant-enough scenarios are presented in the strips, but the scenarios generally turn sour for at least one character. Regardless of the failure, readers know that Calvin and Hobbes will bounce back for the next strip because their failures are never life threatening, merely ridiculous or ironic. Watterson effectively demonstrates failure as a fact of life, as something that happens to everyone. Because failure does not hinder Calvin or Hobbes,
readers reap a sense of pride from the characters — a sense of delight by knowing that they will return again and again.

**Hobbes as an Adult Persona**

Throughout these six strips, Hobbes is pictured as more than an already larger-than-life stuffed tiger; additionally, he performs the role of an adult persona, perhaps as Calvin’s subconscious adult conscience. Since Hobbes is real only to Calvin, Hobbes’ character must be a projection of Calvin’s own experiences. In the family outing strip (#3), Hobbes is pictured getting ready with Calvin in the bathroom. Calvin says, “While I’m taking my bath, you can brush your teeth and comb your hair” (Watterson, 1988, p. 90). As a young boy, Calvin presumably has been learning the correct order-of-events for preparing to leave the house for a special family outing. His parents would be teaching him about washing his hair properly, brushing his teeth, and being sure to comb his hair. As such, we see these teachings reflected in how he relates to Hobbes.

In the next frame, Hobbes asks, “Your dad won’t mind if I use his cologne, will he?” (Watterson, 1988, p. 90) At this point in Calvin’s life, he is still actively observing and imitating the adults around him; he is in a very absorbent stage of the socialization process. Calvin may have seen his father use cologne at some point in time, and thus uses Hobbes to reflect that behavior. The same principle applies when Hobbes ask Calvin, “Think I should shave?” (Watterson, 1988, p.90) Presumably, Calvin has seen his father shaving, thus emulates this grown-up behavior through his stuffed tiger.

However, Hobbes reflects more than adult-like behaviors. His comments also reflect an adult mentality. Strip #5, in which Calvin attempts to parachute off the roof of his house, demonstrates this mentality. Before Calvin jumps from the roof, Hobbes asks, “Did you ask your
mom if you could jump off the roof?” (Watterson, 1988, p. 75) Calvin must recognize that his mother wants to know about potentially dangerous, or at least unordinary, situations. This knowledge is reflected in Hobbes’ question. In the last frame, after Calvin crash lands into the rose bushes below his bedroom window, Hobbes remarks, “His mom’s going to have a fit about those rose bushes” (Watterson, 1988, p. 75). Calvin knows that his mother cherishes the rose bushes and will not appreciate his mishap. Although Calvin may not consciously generate this adult persona, it exists regardless. Hobbes serves as a point of relevance to adult readers, allowing them to empathize with his questions and comments as ideas they have experienced in their own lives.

**Calvin as a Child Persona**

In addition to Hobbes acting as an adult persona, Calvin acts as a larger child persona. His ridiculous ideas, exaggerations, and crisp facial expressions make *Calvin and Hobbes* appealing to children. Strip #1, the television strip, provides an example of these elements. In the second frame, Calvin realizes that he might be able use the remote for the television to “turn off” his father, just as he turns off the television; this is his ridiculous idea, at least in the eyes of adults. For young children, as with Calvin, this idea may seem perfectly valid: The remote functions as an off switch for one device, why shouldn’t it work on other things, too? Accompanying Calvin’s idea is an ear-to-ear smirk with raised, delighted eyebrows. After his plan fails, however, Calvin’s disappointment is exhibited in the last frame with a hunched over stance and furrowed, single-line eyebrows. While children may not consciously ponder Calvin’s specific facial expressions, most young children are undergoing a real-life socialization process that helps them to recognize and emulate these expressions, much as they might imitate
behaviors. Calvin’s facial expressions mold him into a more dynamic, intriguing character, thus making him more appealing from one comic strip character to another real-life child.

Strip #4, the canoeing strip, offers a second example of Calvin as a child persona. Here Calvin is pictured imagining wonderful creatures and timeless objects beneath the surface of the lake, much like a real-life child might use their imagination during playtime. Calvin’s extravagant ideas of “the dim outline of a whale” and “a giant eel slithering up from the bottom” (Watterson, 1988, p. 121) echo the imagination of many young children. His serious, awestruck facial expressions in frames one and three also reflect the seriousness that young children often possess when inventing their own ideas. Although adults may consider such ideas preposterous and impossible, children may genuinely believe their ideas to be perfectly valid and exciting, as reflected here in Calvin’s facial expressions.

A final example of Calvin’s expressive exaggeration is found in strip #2, the homework strip. Here Calvin expresses disbelief at having to write “a whole paragraph!!” (Watterson, 1988, p. 148) Calvin’s facial expressions convey agony and frustration. As young children, being required to write an entire paragraph may indeed be a long, laborious task. Adult readers may merely chuckle at Calvin’s behavior, but young readers recognize Calvin’s frustration and empathize with his feelings of being unable to write more than a single sentence.

*The Narrative Paradigm*

More examples of these five themes certainly exist within the selected strips, and countless other examples appear outside of the coded strips throughout numerous collections and books. Although each of these themes may be considered unique on its own, Walter Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm provides an idea of why these themes actually create a narrative that continues to endure well past its final syndication date. Fisher argues that humans are essentially
story-telling creatures, also called *homo narrans*. As actual characters in the stories lived and told, humans appreciate and are drawn to stories possessing narrative probability and narrative fidelity, two qualities that Fisher defines as necessary for acceptable and cherished stories.

Narrative probability, or coherence, means that a story should make sense within itself: Events should have a logical progression, characters should have acceptable limits and powers, and other sense-making factors such as these. Narrative fidelity is the construct of whether the stories people interact with “ring true” with their own stories and experiences. As story-telling beings, humans cherish quality narratives around the world, across cultures, and throughout time (Fisher, 1984, p. 8).

Each of the themes above contributes to narrative probability and fidelity. Generalizability allows for a much wider audience to recognize the events portrayed in the strip, providing narrative fidelity. Emphasis, which clues readers into verbal fluctuation, also creates narrative fidelity by creating dialogue comparable to real-life situations. Failure provides both narrative probability and fidelity. Readers recognize when a situation has potential for going awry, such as when Calvin parachutes out of his bedroom window, creating narrative probability. Because failure is such a common aspect of real-life, regardless of how minor or severe, Watterson establishes narrative fidelity. Finally, both Hobbes as an adult persona and Calvin as a child persona create both narrative probability and narrative fidelity. By establishing characters that reflect two large subgroups of people throughout the world — that is, adults and children — Watterson expands his reachable audience. Hobbes casually referencing his insurance policy deductible in strip #6, Calvin’s disbelief in asking his mother questions he already knows the answers to in strip #5, and the contrast between Calvin’s and Hobbes’ perceptions in strip #4 all reflect the larger subgroups of adults and children. Whether Watterson intentionally included
these aspects is irrelevant, for they certainly exist throughout these selected strips and numerous other Calvin and Hobbes adventures.

Even despite the fantastical world in which an impossible stuffed tiger can fully interact with a 6-year-old boy, Calvin and Hobbes still thrives. Although Watterson may have intentionally shaped the characters in some ways, as any author, he ultimately leaves the reader with the responsibility of deciding the plausibility of Calvin and Hobbes. In an interview with Watterson, he comments:

…one thing I have fun with is the rarity of things being shown from an adult's perspective. When Hobbes is a stuffed toy in one panel and alive in the next, I'm juxtaposing the "grown-up" version of reality with Calvin's version, and inviting the reader to decide which is truer. Most of the time, the strip is drawn simply from Calvin's perspective, and Hobbes is as real as anyone. [...] I'm not making the strip revolve around the transformation. The viewpoint of the strip fluctuates, and this allows Hobbes to be a "real" character. (Christie, 1987)

By providing readers with this choice, Watterson’s prominent themes establish Calvin and Hobbes as the cherished comic that still circulates today.

**Remembering Calvin & Hobbes: The Summary**

While these elements are key to the success of Calvin and Hobbes, they might also be applied to other similar narratives, such as graphic novels or children’s books. In order for any narrative to succeed and continue to resonate with a growing audience across time, these themes must exist in some form. Social scientist Gregory Bateson (1979, p. 14) writes, “If I am at all fundamentally right in what I am saying, then thinking in terms of stories must be shared by all mind or minds, whether ours or those of redwood forests and sea anemones.” Whatever the story
material, it is the story structure itself that truly matters in order for a story to reach out to multiple cultures across multiple generations. Aspiring authors might strive to emulate Watterson’s themes since they so strongly resonate with a worldwide audience.

These five elements together — generalizability, emphasis, failure, Hobbes as an adult persona, and Calvin as a child persona — push Calvin and Hobbes to the forefront of today’s most beloved comic strips. Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm provides a solid framework for why these themes work together to establish Watterson’s Calvin and Hobbes as one of the most beloved comics of recent years. Watterson does more than simply illustrate a joke. He invites readers to befriend Calvin and Hobbes as active personalities of their individual, personal realities. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, p. 200) writes, “The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do; it is in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds.” Watterson maintains a high degree of authorship, successfully shaping Calvin and Hobbes into beloved real-to-life characters despite the constraints of his narrative form.
References


Appendix

Strip #1: Television (black/white)

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Strip #2: Homework (black/white)

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Strip #4: Canoeing (black/white)

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Strip #3: Family Outing (color)

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Appendix

Strip #5: Parachute (color)

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Appendix

Strip #6: Wagon (color)

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